

CHAPTER 8

APRIL 18, 2011

It was early morning, the light practically blinding Justin. He was still having trouble getting used to the weekend only being a day long. He had briefly considered just not coming to school on Saturday's before deciding it just wasn't worth it. He'd pretty much have to hide out in his house all day, and once Yu and the gang caught on, they'd never let him hear the end of it. He flipped a coin around in between his knuckles, its faces swapping between each daft movement of his hands. He was trying to distract himself from his thoughts, and he figured the best way to do that was to do something he had to concentrate hard on. Yet it still wasn't helping.

"I wonder how Chie's doing. Too much stuff happened yesterday. I hope she's back to her usual self..."

Justin groaned. That was exactly the subject he was trying to avoid thinking of. Last night Chie had given him a peck on the cheek before making her way to her house. He didn't understand why, and the more he thought about it the more his head hurt. He just wanted to avoid the topic altogether, but he couldn't. It had been on his mind the entire night and, so far, all of the day. And yet he couldn't figure out why it bothered him so much. I mean, it had to have been a friendly way of saying goodbye or something, right? They were just friends after all, there was nothing between them. At least... Justin didn't think so.

Interrupting his thoughts, the doors to the classroom slid open, Chie walking through, a wide smile across her face as she approached the trio.

"Oh, mornin'"

"You feeling better today?"

"Yep."

Chie paused for a brief moment, her smile suddenly shifting into a frown as she put her hand around the back of her head.

"Um... Thanks for everything yesterday. It's kinda embarrassing, ya know? You guys were right there to see my hidden feelings and all..."

Chie looked around the group, analyzing everyone's faces as though searching for a reaction. Yu and Yosuke had worn a smile as though to imply it didn't matter to them. It didn't really matter to Justin, either, but he couldn't even make eye-contact with Chie anymore. It felt too awkward. He could practically feel her eyes upon him, looking at his face for his tell-tale smirk, that same smirk he did every time Chie had

been over-reacting. Instead she found Justin trying to look in the opposite direction, as though he were ashamed of her. Justin could almost hear her spirit breaking. He felt like a huge douche, but he still couldn't force himself to look her way.

"D-Don't sweat it."

They way he stuttered out the sentence; he could tell everyone had disapproved of Justin and his refusal to look in her general direction. Yosuke was practically trying to cover Justin's bases for him, but to no avail. He knew what he had done, and it was too late to remedy the situation. Chie looked away and towards the ground. She was almost physically pained by Justin's refusal to acknowledge her, she was practically about to cry, and yet as much as Justin had been there for her when she was like this before, he couldn't find a single word in his mind to say to her. Not a single one. And he hated himself for it.

"The same thing happened to Yosuke, right?" She was choking up her words, painfully trying to force the conversation away from Justin's assholeishness. "So... what was it like?"

"Huh? Uhhh, how should I put this...? Oh, I nearly forgot! None of that happened when yours awakened huh?"

Justin almost found it humorous how he was trying to force the subject over towards Yu instead. Almost. He still felt completely empty inside.

"Hmmm, could that be because you've got nothing to hide?"

I doubt it...

"Oh? So nothing happened for you? I gotta agree that you seem like a pretty open guy. There's a funny air about you."

Open? The guy hardly talks!

"I dunno, I guess that's what draws people to you, or something like that."

"Was that a compliment?"

Chie forced herself to laugh. She was still choking up words. She was still obviously hurt by what Justin had been doing.

"Yeah, it's a compliment."

"Uh... if you say so..."

Yu and Yosuke chuckled slightly at the comment, though neither Justin or Chie joined in. He could tell she was looking at him again. He hated what his very presence was doing to her. He half considered excusing himself from the conversation, but figured that would just make things work.

"Oh... Uh... I forgot something in my locker! ...I'll, uh... I'll be back in a second."

Justin knew she was lying, but all the same he lifted his eyes from the desk below him, focusing them on Chie as she made her way to the door. Her right fist was furiously rubbing at her eye, and it was immediately clear that she was crying. Luckily for Justin, apparently Yousuke and Yu had noticed and proceeded to rip him a new one as the door closed behind her.

"Dude, what the hell!?"

"I know, I know..."

Yu only gazed at him disapprovingly. And yet, that's all he needed to do to make Justin feel like complete shit.

"You know what she went through, why are you acting like this?"

"Something... Something happened last night."

Yu and Yosuke softened their glares slightly as they exchanged eye-contact with each other, as though both were curious as to what exactly happened.

"W-What do you mean?"

Justin sighed. "Can you keep a secret? Cause I know Chie would kill me if she ever found out I told you two."

"Well I don't know about Yosuke, but I can. What's up?"

Justin paused for a moment. He wasn't entirely sure he even wanted them to know, and even if they did, he was sure they wouldn't understand.

"Well... You guys know how I had to walk Chie home last night, right? Well I was dropping her off at her house and she... Kinda sorta gave me a peck on the cheek."

Yosuke and Yu gave each other a look. They seemed like they were both surprised, and not so angry anymore, but somehow telling other people about it just made Justin feel even shittier. This wasn't exactly something he wanted people to know about, and he doubted Chie wanted anyone to know about it either, but clearly he didn't have any idea how to handle the situation. He needed some advice and fast.

"Seriously?"

"Yeah... I have no idea what to do."

"Honestly, you two would make a cute couple."

"Oh fuck you, Narukami. It's not like that."

"Seems like Chie thinks it is."

Justin hadn't actually thought of it like that. He had just been being nice but... Did Chie think there was supposed to be more to it than that?

"Shit... You might be right..."

"Maybe you should talk to her about it."

"I'm no good at that kind of stuff..."

"What're you talking about? Dude, you're always cheering her up. Usually at my expense, but that's beside the point."

"It's not the same thing, Yosuke."

"Either way, you should still apologize to her. She probably thinks you're avoiding her on purpose right now."

"I WAS avoiding her on purpose."

"But not for the reasons she thinks."

Justin groaned. He would have to apologize to her sooner or later, but how do you bring a topic like that up without making things ridiculously awkward. I mean, the way Justin saw it, they were just friends. What if Chie actually thought there was more to it? What if he was just over-reacting and that was her way of saying goodbye. Either way, he'd feel like a huge dick afterwards.

"All right, all right. I'll go talk to her. But I swear to God if any of you mention this to anyone--"

"You're secret's safe with us."

Justin picked himself up from his seat and made his way to the door. He took one last look behind him at Yu and Yosuke. He didn't like the look of the grins on their faces. He knew he shouldn't have said anything to them.

"Chie?"

Justin had finally found his way to Chie's locker. She had been the only one down there at the moment, and her head was pressed against the cold steel of her locker, tears dripping down from her face.

"What do you want!?"

"Look. We need to talk..."

"What's there to talk about? You made it quite clear what you think of me. You're ashamed of me..."

"It's not that..."

Justin rested his hand on Chie's shoulder. He half expected her to try and push it away, but instead she just let him rest it there.

"Come on, stop crying. You know I hate seeing you like this..."

"I don't give a damn!"

"Chie, please, calm down... You didn't do anything wrong."

"Then why are you being such a jerk!?"

"You want me to just say it? You remember last night, on the way back to your house?"

"Y-yeah?"

"Before you left you... did something. Uh... You know..."

Chie just stared at him blankly. She really had no idea what he was getting at, and that's what was making this incredibly awkward for Justin.

"You gave me a peck on the cheek before you left..."

Chie's face turned bright red.

"I Wh-What!?"

"Yeah, don't you remember?"

"N-No, I don't."

Justin thought it was completely stunning, but giving her face a quick look over, it seemed she was telling the truth. In fact, she looked completely mortified. *She must have done it subconsciously, though why is another question. One that I don't plan on asking anytime soon.*

"Well... You did. So... yeah..."

"Oh God. I-I'm sorry..."

"You don't need to apologize, though I'm surprised you don't remember..."

Chie averted her gaze, much like Justin had done earlier. Her face was redder than he had ever seen it been before in his life.

“So yeah... That’s why I was acting that way...”

“I... I’m sorry for flipping out on you.”

“It’s fine. To be honest, I WAS acting kind of like a douche. Let’s just pretend none of this ever happened.”

Chie nodded her head in agreement. Justin didn’t think he needed to tell her that to get her to try and push it out of her mind, but he was hoping that would clear some of the tension between them. Of course, the tension was soon broken anyway by the sound of the bell ringing.

“Shit! We’re late!”

“Oh god, my parents will never let me hear the end of this.”

Justin rubbed at his chin for a moment.

“Alright, I got an idea. Follow me.”

“Geez, what’s taking those two so long?”

“Maybe they’re, you know...” Yousuke gave Yu a wink and a quick nudge of his elbow. Yu immediately blushed at the implication.

“I don’t think Chie’s the kind to skip class for that...”

“But Justin is. Has he ever once paid attention in class?”

“No.”

“Plus, he’s pretty good at convincing Chie to do stuff.”

“I don’t know... He said it wasn’t like that...”

“Oh man, you believed that?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Dude, did you see how defensive he got when you said they’d make a cute couple?”

“What, you think he has a crush on her or something?”

“I don’t just think so. I know so.”

Yosuke’s and Yu’s conversation was interrupted by the slight sound of vibrating in Yosuke’s pocket. He carefully, but swiftly opened the phone so King Moron wouldn’t

hear it. Class had already started, and he was in the process of taking attendance, so Yu and Yosuke had been whispering the entire time. Yosuke took a glance at the text message he just received, a smug look crossing his face.

We're at the door right now. Give us a distraction.

Yosuke chuckled silently under his breath. Slightly because causing a commotion was his specialty, slightly because Justin had actually taken the time to use proper grammar in a text when they were this late. Yosuke shot his hand up into the sky.

"Um... Mr. Marooka? I think you have something in your teeth."

Yu gave Yosuke a glance. For a moment he was about to kick at his ankles, until he noticed the doors to the class slowly slipping open. Mr. Marooka was too busy making his way over to Yosuke's desk to really notice. Yu was finally starting to catch on.

"And what is that supposed to mean, you little punk!?"

Justin and Chie slowly made their way into the room. However, instead of making a mad dash for their desk during the commotion, it seemed the two were slowly sneaking towards their desks, while moving backwards. *What the hell are they doing?* Yu thought to himself.

"Well it's really bothering me, I mean it's hu- Oh sorry wait, that's just your tooth. Nevermind."

"WHAT!? THAT'S IT! YOU'RE GOING ON MY SHIT LIST, EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY!"

Marooka turned around, about to march his way back up to the front of the classroom. Yu almost had to look away; Chie and Justin hadn't made it back to their seats yet, and he did not want to see the shitstorm unfold.

"And where do YOU TWO think you're going, sit back down!"

"Yes Sir, King Moron, sir!"

"You're already on my shit list, you punk!"

Justin giggled a bit, as he turned around to make his way back to his desk, this time walking straight towards it instead of walking backwards. Chie smiled too as she slid over her desk to her seat. Yu had finally caught on. If they walked backwards, they'd be facing the door if they got caught. That way it would look like they were sneaking out, not in. Yosuke gave them a quick wink as they turned around to make eye contact with the rest of the gang.

"You owe me for that." Yosuke added on, half joking.

"You owed Chie a DVD, so I think we can call it even."

After hours of sitting through school, and another hour or so of walking to the Junes, everyone had made their way inside of the television again. Even longer still until they made their way back to the entrance of the castle. *There has to be a way of getting back and forth quicker...* Justin sighed as they finally came to a stop in front of the castle. Everyone was getting their gear ready to go inside, but seeing as Justin only needed to put a few bullets in the chamber of his gun, he was done much sooner than everyone else. It was probably for the better anyway. The walk had not done wonders for his ribs, and he needed a moment to sit down and get his bearings. It was a good ten or so minutes before everyone was ready to get going.

"Alright, so what's the plan?"

"Hopefully something with less running this time... I don't think my lungs can take anymore of that..."

Justin moved a stray strand of hair out of his eye using the barrel of his gun. Chie looked at him with a combination of disparagement and worry. *She get's way too worked up over this stuff. It's not like I'm gonna pull the trigger when it's pointed right at my head.*

"We don't need to rush. Yukiko will be fine. It's important that we pace ourselves accordingly."

Yu was right, for once. Or maybe that was just Justin's lungs talking. Either way, Justin was completely on board with Yu's plan. The investigation team made their way inside of the castle, slowly walking down through the hallways. Very rarely did they run into any shadows, and when they did, they had been brought down relatively quickly. Although Justin was trigger-happy the day before while chasing Chie, he had been hesitant to fire many shots off today. *A sword is a pay-once play forever kind of thing, a gun was pay-as-you-play.* Justin almost hated himself for using gaming terminology to describe weapons, but it was what he was most familiar with. Either way, ammo was expensive, and he was already skipping lunch a few days this week as it was.

"Hey Justin, I've been meaning to ask, you said something about your shadow yesterday. How exactly did that happen?"

"Oh boy, this again. I already explained this to Chie, but basically you remember how I hit my head? Well I guess that let the shadow get inside my mind or some shit. I don't know."

"Inside your mind? How hard did you hit your head exactly?"

"Yosuke, never piss off someone holding a gun."

"All right, all right; point taken!"

"You still never told me what your shadow said to you."

"I thought we agreed we weren't going to talk about it."

"I know, but I'm still curious."

Justin sighed. He knew he was going to get kicked in the balls at some point during his recap.

"Let's just put it this way. Other me is a perv."

"...What'd he say?" Yosuke seemed way too interested. He had on that same grin he had on this morning when they had that discussion about Chie.

"I have never heard more comments about people's assess in all my life. Hell, I think he commented on YOUR ass at one point, Yosuke."

"Waitwhat!?"

Justin knew that wasn't the response Yosuke was expecting. Justin knew Yosuke had wanted to hear something about Justin and Chie, so when Justin saw the opening to creep Yosuke the hell out, he decided to take it. That would teach him for putting his nose in other peoples' business.

"Yeah you remember that time you sat on rotten egg?"

"Not cool, man."

"Neither is you asking about my shadow."

"All right, fair enough. Though something is bothering me."

"Yeah?"

"You've only talked to your shadow right? So does that mean he's still... You know...?"

Justin recalled the words the shadow had said the last time he had heard it. *"Then I better step up my game," I believe it was. This isn't giving me much hope for what's going on with my shadow.*

"Probably. He doesn't bother me though, so we can just have our discussion, I can accept him, and we can go on our merry way."

"You think it'll be that easy?"

"I don't see why not."

It took some more walking, but the group eventually made their way back to where they had found Chie the day before. The doors were strangely closed again. Justin didn't recall any one closing the doors on their way out yesterday.

"Teddie, you picking up anything?"

"I sense someone behind this door."

"You think it's Yukiko?"

Chie seemed to get enthusiastic at the thought. Justin couldn't really blame her. The sooner they got out of here, the better.

"Well only one way to find out. Everyone help me get this door open."

As the door opened, they were greeted by a familiar sight. There was a strange black smoke clouding the room, but Justin could still make out a humanoid figure. It had black flowing hair, just like Yukiko. But something was completely off about this. *Why isn't she freaking out if this IS Yukiko? Actually, why is she wearing that dress? Unless...* Justin placed his arms out to stop everyone from proceeding any closer. He couldn't be sure quite yet, but he was almost entirely positive that wasn't Yukiko. It had to be her shadow.

"Yukiko...?"

"Yukiko-san!? Are you alright!?"

"That's not Yukiko..."

"H-Huh? What are you talking about, that looks just like her!"

"Yukiko, are you all right?"

"Heehee... Ahahahahahaha!"

"I knew it. That maniacal laugh? That distorted voice? This is her shadow."

"Oh my! Special guests? I wonder how they'll play into all of this! Things are really heating up!"

There was a brief pause in conversation between everyone. Justin glanced to each side of him. Everyone seemed to be confused, though Chie seem more so than the rest. Why wouldn't she, though? This was her best friend, and her she was being... Well, weird as all fuck.

"Okie-dokie! I'm going back to the hunt for my Prince Charming! Ohhh, where could he be...? This place is huge! It's sooo exciting, but it makes it

so hard to find him! Ohh! Maybe he's playing hide-and-seek in the fog! Ready or not, here I come!"

"This... this is just shameful."

Justin half expected Chie to slap him for that, what this being Yukiko's inner self and all, but instead he found her only nodding in agreement.

"Let's go further in then... Shall we?"

Justin was about to take a step forward, hoping to deal with the shadow here, rather than later, but was interrupted by the appearance of what appeared to be a title card. It read in flashy, colorful letters: "Princess Yukiko's Hunt for Her Prince Charming."

"Wh-What the hell is this!?"

"What the hell? Is that... Is that a title card?"

"You're... You're not Yukiko... Who are you!?"

Justin resisted the urge to slam his palm into his head. It was only a few moments ago that he thoroughly explained to Chie that this was Yukiko's shadow. How the hell did she not get it?

"What're you talking about? I'm Yukiko... and Yukiko is me."

"Where's the real Yukiko!?"

Sound burst through the halls, as though a crowd had been gathering around them. Justin couldn't see anything, but he could hear it all very clearly. The voices were getting visibly upset, chatting amongst each other, groans and moans filling the air.

"What's with these voices...!?"

"It's like a studio audience."

"The shadows are getting agitated!"

"They're what now? What's that mean?"

"Well, I'm off again! Heehee! You'd better be waiting with bells on, my dear Prince!"

"Honey, I think I speak for everyone here when I say we don't roll that way. Except maybe Yosuke."

"Hey what's that supposed to mean!?"

"It means I am calling you a homosexual, Yosuke."

“Dude, whatever...”

And with that the shadow charged off in the other direction. It took a second for him to react, but Justin soon started to trail the shadow, the rest of the gang following close behind.

“Hey, wait!”

They practically had to shout to hear each other as they ran down the hallways to keep up with Yukiko’s shadow. How in the hell she was running so fast with such a bulky dress on was beyond Justin, but it really didn’t matter. The investigation team tried to make heads and toes of what was going on as best as they could while still keeping up with the shadow.

“I don’t think she’s getting this excited over nothing! The real Yukiko wants to show us something! I can feel it!”

“Yeah!? Well, the real Yukiko should slow the fuck down!”

“It’s hard to explain! It seems like she has a strong connection to this castle! This is a lot more dangerous than I thought!”

“I still don’t get it! Why a castle! Is this supposed to be symbolic!?”

“I don’t really think shadows are the poetic type!”

“Aren’t they though?!”

“Look, it doesn’t matter!”

Justin stopped as he came face to face with another door. It was closed, but he knew the shadow had run this way. There was no doubt about it, though he had to wonder how the hell she got through on her own. It wasn’t like she was that far ahead of them anyway, so if she had stopped to open or close the door, Justin should have been able to see it. He stopped to catch his breath, forcing air in and out of his lungs.

“She’s behind this door but... There’s something else there too...”

Justin wheezed as he tried to regain his composure. Everyone gave each other a quick glance over before turning their attention back to Justin.

“Are... you all right?”

“Yeah... I’m... fine...”

“You’ve been running out of breath a lot lately.”

“Like I said... Not the athletic type...”

"Maybe you should sit this one out..."

Justin turned around to give Yosuke his usual death glare. What, he's done with Chie now that she has a persona, so now it's his turn? Fuck. That.

"I'm going. That's final."

Justin practically kicked the door open by himself, he was bursting with rage. Justin reached into his pocket and grabbed his lighter, lighting a cigarette up in his mouth. Come to think of it, he hadn't had a smoke in a couple of days. He was probably going through withdrawal, which would explain the heavy breathing as of late. Looking up from the lit end of his cigarette, Justin noticed that the door did give way to his kick but it wasn't completely open. He made a gesture to the rest of the team to help him push hit the rest of the way open. As they made their way inside, they were greeted by a familiar sight. Not only had Yukiko's shadow been there, but so had Yukiko, sprawled out across the floor. From the looks of it she was completely unconscious, but even then everyone had to practically hold Chie back as they made their way forward.

However, something had caught Justin's eye. It wasn't Yukiko, or her shadow, or that they were finally getting to the end of this tangled maze of a castle. On the footsteps just to the left of Yukiko's shadow, he could make out another figure, sitting down and puffing on a cigarette. Its golden eyes were staring off into the distance as if it hadn't even noticed the group of teenagers barrage in, but then, the shadows had a habit of doing that.

"Yukiko!"

"I knew it... There's two of her!"

"And two of me apparently." Justin added on nonchalantly as he took another drag of his cigarette. Normally he might have gotten panicked at the sight of his shadow awaiting his arrival, but as with all his anxieties, smoking helped keep his mind calm and focused.

"Huh? Oh shit...!"

"Oh? Ooooooh, what's this?"

Justin's shadow, having heard Yukiko's shadow react, turned his attention towards the group, and evil smirk sweeping across his face.

"Looks like the guests of honor have finally arrived!"

Justin puffed out some smoke, taking a moment of silence to think before turning his attention towards his shadow, mocking him from the corner of the staircase.

"I am not in the mood for this shit today, what do you want?"

“Me? Well I just came to watch the fun!”

“I wouldn’t call this FUN.”

“I would.”

“I know you would. Can we get this shit over with. I’d like to focus my attention on ONE shadow at a time, thank you very much.”

Justin’s shadow laughed with maniacal glee.

“Like I said, I’m just here to watch. I have bigger plans in store for you anyway.”

“The fuck does that mean.”

“All in due time.”

The shadow took another drag of its cigarette before turning his attention back towards Yukiko’s shadow. Justin almost wanted to bust a cap in his ass from where he was standing, but he knew how that would turn out. Looking around the rest of the team, it seemed no one was quite sure how to react to Justin’s shadow. Technically, he wasn’t any immediate threat, where as Yukiko’s shadow was, but... They couldn’t just leave him there right?

“It seems that four princes are here to see me! My my! Are you the surprise guests who came in late.”

“What? You just saw us, like five minutes ago. Of course it’s us!”

“Awwwwwww... I wish I’d gotten a better look at you!”

The shadow slowly made its way down the stairs, closer to where Yukiko had been laying unconscious. Justin immediately drew his magnum and pointed it at Yukiko, much to his own shadow’s glee.

“Oh, put that damn thing away. You know how well that worked last time. That is to say, not at all. Hehehe...”

Even though his shadow had a point, this entire situation made him too uneasy to lower his weapon. He exhaled some smoke out of the corner of his mouth. In retrospect, he’d need one hand to hold the cigarette, and if he wanted to be accurate with the magnum, he’d need both hands around its grip. So long as there was an immediate danger, Justin couldn’t take his other hand off the gun, and had to leave the cigarette in his mouth. It wasn’t really a problem... except now he really had no way of talking. Unless... Justin spit the cigarette off to the side, stomping his foot down hard on it. He had completely forgotten that they were

standing on a rug, and rugs were flammable, so he was lucky the cigarette hadn't gone out of his reach.

"My, it's getting crowded here. Why don't you and I go somewhere else...?"

"Please tell me she means 'you' the singular and not 'you' the plural."

Chie whacked Justin upside the back of his head for his comment. In retrospect it probably wasn't the best idea to make jokes like that about Yukiko when she was best friends with a psychopath.

"A land far, far away, where no one knows me. If you're my Prince, you'd take me there, won't you? C'mon... pretty please?"

"Oooh. Is this 'scoring a hot stud'!?"

"Not the time, Teddie."

"Four princes...? Wait, does that include me, too...?"

"Oh I sure as hell hope not."

"Duh! The fourth one's gotta be me!"

"I seriously doubt that."

"I can't decide which of you makes a worse Prince."

"And what's that supposed to mean!?"

"Well Chie, you're a chick. And Teddie... Well, Teddie is a fucking bear."

Either we're approaching lesbian territory, or bestiality territory. Both of them make me want to vomit a little bit.

"My votes on the bro with a vagina." Justin's shadow smirked from the staircase.

"Bro with a vagina...? Really...?"

"And what the hell is THAT supposed to mean!?"

"Just ignore everything he says. He does that kinda shit a lot."

Chie smacked Justin upside the back of his head. Again.

"What the fuck was that for!?"

"Well your shadow said it, so you must have been thinking it!"

“No, you idiot! Were you thinking half the shit that your shadow said!?”

“Well... No... I-”

“Well then why would it be any different for me!?”

“S-Sorry...”

Justin’s shadow smirked at the violent out lash he had managed to get out of Chie. He may not be able to fuck with Justin’s head anymore, but he could get everyone around him to hate his guts, apparently.

“Chie... Yes, she’s my Prince... She always leads the way... Chie’s a strong Prince...”

Brain, remind me later to explain how a hierarchy works to Yukiko. Cause I’m pretty sure princes don’t do shit.

“...Or at least, she WAS.”

“Was...?”

“So then Teddie’s the fourth prince? This is just fucked up in every way.”

Teddie was practically jumping for joy that Chie’s princely status had apparently been given over to him. It was really creepy when you realized how excited both Yukiko’s shadow and Teddie were about his new title. Like, nightmares for a week, kind of creepy.

“When it comes down to it, Chie’s just not good enough! She can’t take me away from here! She can’t save me!”

“Yukiko...”

“Save? Save her from what?”

“S-Stop...”

Justin and the rest of the gang had been so focused on Yukiko’s shadow that they hadn’t even noticed Yukiko flicker back into consciousness. It was clear that Chie wanted to run over to Yukiko, but Justin put his hand out, signaling for Chie to stay back.

“Trying to separate the two lovebirds, huh? That’s cold man.”

One strike and he was down. Chie had kicked Justin straight in the crotch after his shadow’s snarky comment.

“Whoa! Chie!!”

“-THERFUCKER! I TOLD YOU- THAT IS HIM TALKING, NOT ME! SONOfa-“

“S-Sorry, instincts.”

“Your instincts hurt like a bitch!! Mother-”

“Oh I can get used to this! Shall we make it a hat-trick?”

“Historic inn? Manager training!? I’m sick of all these things chaining me down! I never asked to be born here! Everything’s decided for me! From how I live, to where I die! To hell with it all!”

“That’s not true...”

“I just want to go somewhere far away... Anywhere but here... Someone, please take me away... I can’t leave here on my own...”

Justin had finally made his way back up to his standing position, no thanks to Chie. He gripped his gun tight around the grip once again and pointed it in the shadow’s direction.

“Well that would explain the whole “prince,” thing.”

“I’m completely useless...”

“Stop... Please stop...”

“Just don’t react to it Yukiko. It’s gonna hurt, but if you don’t react it can’t do anything to you.”

“That’s a bunch of bull.”

“You haven’t done jackshit to me. I don’t see why Yukiko would be any different.”

“True. But I can piss Chie off, and then that bitch’ll do the rest of the work.”

Justin jumped backwards. Sure enough, Chie had reacted to his shadow calling her a bitch, and had attempted to kick Justin again. Of course, having thought ahead, Chie’s kick completely missed him.

“Dammit Chie!”

“I’m sorry! I’m trying not to!”

“Try harder!”

“Case and point.”

"I have no hope if I stay, and no courage to leave... So I sit on my ass hoping that someday my Prince will come! I don't care where we go! Anywhere's fine! As long as it's not here, I don't give a damn!"

"Oh, fuck this."

Justin dropped his aim on the shadow, running forth to make his way up towards where Yukiko's shadow was. Or at least he was until he heard a shot being fired off. Immediately guessing the source, Justin turned his attention towards his shadow, sitting nonchalantly against the stairs, a smoke on one hand, a magnum in the other.

"What? You going to shoot me? You and I both know damn well you can't kill me unless I deny your existence."

"Hmm... True..."

The shadow raised his arm once again, only this time, rather than point the gun at Justin, he pointed it down towards the rest of the group.

"...But nowhere does it say I can't kill these sadsacks."

Justin paused for a moment. He wasn't sure whether his shadow was bluffing or not. I mean, if that was true, why hadn't he just killed Yukiko so her shadow could take her place? Unless there was some sort of "honor amongst thieves," thing going on here, some sort of code that stipulated they couldn't kill each other's counterparts. Justin decided that it wasn't worth risking before stepping back down the steps slowly, his gun's sights switching swiftly between his shadow and Yukiko's.

"Good boy. Maybe if you'll bark we'll throw you a bone next time."

"Oh you just wait until I get my hands on you."

"Until I get my hands on YOU, you mean."

"Historical tradition? Pride of the town? What a bunch of bullshit!"

"How dare you..."

"Calm down Yukiko. Don't say what I think you're going to say..."

"That's how I really feel... Isn't that right... me!?"

"N-No..."

"Stop! Don't say it!"

"No! You're not me!"

“SHIT!”

Both shadows seemed to laugh in perfect unison, although where Justin’s shadow seemed to just be enjoying the sight, Yukiko’s shadow seemed to change. To morph into a new form. God could only hope it wasn’t as disgusting as Chie’s was.

“Heeheehee...! Aaaah! This feels wonderful! It’s building... more and more... If this keeps up... I’ll... I’ll...!”

A sudden wave of power blew Justin and Yukiko back. Strangely enough, Chie, Youske and Yu were able to stand their ground just fine. It must have had something to do with having a persona. As Justin opened his eyes back up after having collided with the wall behind them, he noticed something different in Yukiko’s shadows place. It looked like a giant red bird, hanging out of a cage. It wasn’t anywhere near as disturbing as Chie’s had been, but it was still wrong in everyway. Justin grabbed a hold of his magnum.

“Yukiko!”

“Yeah, I’m okay too guys! Don’t sweat it or anything!”

“Not the time, dude!”

“We have to stop it! Yukiko’s in danger!”

“We know!”

“It’s all right, Yukiko... Just hang in there! We’ll save you!”

Yukiko’s shadow’s power burst forth from the cage it had been residing in, fire spreading across the room. The rug they had been standing on was soon set ablaze as the group found themselves fleeing from the fire trail that had been set into motion. Everyone was having a hard time breathing with all the smoke, save for Justin, who, while still finding slight difficulty in breathing, had been finding the smoke easier to breathe in. *And they said smoking will kill ya.*

“I am a shadow... The true self... Now, my princes... Why don’t we dance and make merry together?”

Chie, Yu, and Yosuke summoned their personas, once again making Justin feel like the odd-ball out for not being able to summon one himself. Each persona dashed around the flames, trying to make their way towards the caged bird. Each having relatively no success as stray bits of molten stone collided with them from the burning building. Justin took a look around, noticing that the bird seemed awfully focused on the personas, and not so much the people wielding them. Blast after blast of raw heat soared above his head, yet not a single one had come his way. He could probably make his way around the fire and get a sneak attack in from behind.

Justin ran through the smoke, covering his mouth with the end of his jacket. He had almost wanted to take it off, but decided against it. It was a really nice hoodie after all, he would hate if it caught on fire, even if it was practically killing him here. Pieces of burning rubble came crashing down around him, and more than once he was almost struck by a persona being sent hurling around the arena. Everyone had been doing scratch damage here and there, but that wasn't doing much good when Yukiko's shadow was burning the entire building down.

“Oooh, look at you playing the hero. Covert Ops this time?”

“Unless you're going to shoot someone, move out of the fucking way.”

“That ain't a half bad idea.”

“It doesn't matter if it is, you couldn't do it if you wanted to.”

“How so?”

“See how close I am to you? You couldn't pull the trigger without risking hitting me. Which is violation of... shadow code, or whatever the fuck it is you guys call it.”

The shadow paused before groaning slightly.

“...Fine. You win this round. But don't think this is over.”

Justin's shadow vanished in a puff of purplish smoke, his figure dissolving away into the smoke that filled the air. Justin took a deep breath, or as deep of one as he could with all the smoke in the air. He could see Yukiko knocked out cold just behind her shadow's cage. They had to finish this quickly; otherwise she would inhale too much smoke. Justin examined the cage thoroughly. There had to be some sort of structural weakness he could use to his advantage.

It took a moment, but he finally found it. The chain that had been holding the cage up had a slightly rust kink. If he shot at it, it should loosen enough for the entire chain to break. “You know what they say about the canary in the mine?” He pointed his gun upwards and fired a few shots at the chain. The first two shots ended up missing. He was almost entirely positive one hit Yosuke's persona too at some point. The third shot however, found its target. The bullet ripped clean through the metal of the chain, the cage crashed down to the ground.

“How 'bout the canary in the furnace?”

The bird inside the cage twisted its head around. Its body was tangled in the twisted metal of the cage that had been bent by the collision with the floor, but it could still twitch its limbs ever so slightly. Unfortunately for Justin, the head had been twisted towards him after the collision.

“AGI.”

Chie, having barely seen this from where she was standing ordered her persona to move in.

“Tomoe, Bufu!”

“Wait, Chie don’t!”

Too late, Chie had made a shield of ice to protect Justin from the incoming blast. The only problem with that though, is that fire still very much melts ice. Justin turned his head to avoid the blast of steam that emerged from the impact, but to not much avail. He still took a good chunk of it to the left side of his face, and it burned like a bitch. He screamed out in pain, dropping to the ground, his head in his hands. Chie had been completely speechless. What had she done?

Yu and Yosuke quickly used the distraction to seal in one last blow on canary, severing its head from its body, effectively disabling the shadow. The shadow’s corpse twitched as its shape returned back to that of Yukiko’s. It was irrelevant though, the room was completely on fire, and would collapse at any second. Chie, Yu, and Yosuke ordered their personas to grab Yukiko, Justin, and Yukiko’s shadow respectively. As much as they’d like to just leave the shadow there to burn, they knew they had to take it with them. The personas dropped the three off outside the entrance to the room as burning rubble sealed the way in. Everyone huffed a sigh of relief, save Justin who was still holding back screams of pain.

“Justin, are you all right?” Chie was practically spitting the words out of her mouth. This had been completely her fault. She hadn’t once considered the possibility of the ice melting like that.

“It’s fin- No it’s not- SHIT that burns!! Look, is Yukiko alright!?” Justin had his hand pressed against his left eye.

“We can check on her in a second, are you going to be okay?”

“It burns like a bitch, but I’ll be fine.” If only that were true. Chie was hesitant to leave Justin’s side, but forced herself to go check on Yukiko anyway. They still need to deal with her shadow anyway.

“Yukiko, are you hurt...!?”

Yukiko had only just regained consciousness and had turned her head to make eye contact with her shadow, looking up from cold ground they had dropped it on.

“No... I’m not--”

“We understand. You’re not the only one like that, Yukiko-san. Everyone has something they can’t show to other people, or don’t want to admit to themselves...”

Chie looked hesitatingly towards the ground before looking back towards Yukiko.

"Yukiko... I'm sorry. I was so self-centered that... I never understood what you were going through... I'm your friend, and I still... Oh, I'm so sorry..."

"Chie..."

"I was always jealous of you, Yukiko. You had everything that I didn't... That jealousy was like a wall, and I was so lonely...! I wanted you to need me ... But it was me we who needed you. I can't do anything right on my own... I've cause so much trouble for Yosuke and... especially Justin. I mean... look at him."

"I can hear everything you're saying and it is NOT HELPING! Shiiiiiiiiittttttt-"

"If you weren't by my side, I... I wouldn't know what to do..."

"Chie... I never saw the real you either... I was too busy trying to find an easy way out."

"Look guys, this is REALLY heartwarming, but I swear to god my eye hurts enough without crying!"

"'I want to run away...' 'I want someone to save me...' You're right; those feelings are part of me, too. I understand now... You're me."

The shadow nodded in agreement, and much like Chie's shadow had done when she had confronted hers, it erupted into a burst of white light, taking on a new shape. It was humanoid, but with bird like wings. It was beautiful for what Justin could see from the eye he didn't have covered. And much like Chie had, Yukiko soon collapsed as the persona vanished into thin air.

"Are you okay!?"

"Yes, I'm just a little tired... You all came to rescue me...?"

"Of course!"

"Thank you..."

"Don't even mention it. I'm just so glad you're safe..."

"So, who threw you in here?"

"Huh...? Who are you? Rather... What are you?"

"I'm Teddie! So, who threw you in?"

Yukiko paused, looking towards the ground. It was hard to tell if she was trying to think or if she was ashamed of something.

"I don't know... I think... someone called my name... But my memory's a blur. I can't remember who it was... I'm sorry, um... Teddie."

"No new clues..."

"Not necessarily. Now we know for sure that someone threw Yukiko-san in here."

"Th-That doesn't matter now anyway. Look we should really be making sure Justin is alright."

"Oh, crap, I almost forgot!"

"Nice to see you care, asshole!"

"Quit your bitching and show us your eye."

Justin lifted his palm from in front of his eye. The area around it was completely red, but it looked like it would heal given some time. What was a problem, however, was the way Justin immediately started to blink his eye in rapid succession. He was panicking about something, though what he was panicking about was uncertain at first.

"G-guys!? I can't see shit...!"

"Wh-What!? Qu-Quick, how many fingers am I holding up!?"

"Four, I can still see out of my other eye, dumbass."

Everyone had started to panic, even Yukiko who had pretty much been unconscious throughout the entire affair.

"W-We need to get him to a doctor. Like, right now!"

"No. No, fuck that!"

"You can't even see out of your eye! You HAVE to go, dude!"

"It's probably fine!"

"You know what'll happen if that thing gets infected!? You're going, that's final!"

Chie didn't even speak up, though from what Justin could make out, her eyes were completely dilated. She was mortified that whatever the fuck was going on with Justin's eye had been completely her fault. He wanted to reassure her that he'd be fine, but he was still shocked by what was going on himself. Yosuke grabbed Justin by the arm and helped him up. Justin could still walk fine, but as far as Yosuke was concerned, he was going to have a hard time moving around if he couldn't see. Everyone pushed on ahead, trying to pace themselves as quickly as possible, with Chie following timidly behind.

“W-Well!?”

Justin had finally made his way back to the waiting room. He was wearing a bandage wrapped around his forehead and his left eye. He had also swept his hair over to the side to try and hide the bandages as much as possible. Unlike the last time he was here, the entire gang was waiting for him to come back outside. Even Yukiko, though she had understandably fallen asleep. Justin was half surprised they didn't drop her off at home. I mean, isn't she supposed to be missing?

“Well, good news and bad news.”

“Oh god...”

Taking a look at Chie, Justin could tell she had been crying at some point in the waiting room. I mean it WAS kind of her fault, but Justin would take being blind any day over being burnt alive to a crisp.

“They say the burns weren't too bad, so my vision will come back, but uh... It's going to take a while...”

“How long is a while...?”

“A couple weeks.”

Chie burst back out into tears. She was really beating herself up over this. Justin decided to take a seat next to her, resting his hand on her shoulder.

“Calm down Chie, it's not your fault.”

“Yes it is!”

“No, it's not. If you didn't do what you did, I probably would have been burnt alive. Then we'd have more problems than me not being able to see out of one of my eyes.”

“I could have done something else! I didn't have to use Bufu...!”

“You kinda did. Besides, check this out.”

Justin grabbed a hold of a cane in his other hand, tossing it up ever so slightly so he could grab it at a lower point on its shaft.

“I get to carry this thing around everywhere I go for the next few weeks!”

“How is that supposed to be a good thing!?”

"Well it's not like I NEED it. Have you carried a cane around when you didn't need one? That shit is amazing. You can twirl it around and do Broadway dance numbers and stuff."

Chie chuckled only slightly at the joke. It wasn't like it was supposed to be funny in the first place. He was dead serious, canes are the shit.

"Look, point is, don't worry about it. I only need one eye anyway."

"...Thanks..."

"No, madam, thank you. Now then, if we're done talking about my sorry escapades, I believe we still need to get Yukiko home."

"Huh? Oh shit, that's right! We should get going."

Yosuke gave Yukiko a gentle shake to wake her up before they departed. Justin was the first to walk out of the building, a twirl in his cane, a whistle on his lips. All he needed was a top hat and he would be golden. Chie immediately followed, though she kept a slow pace behind Justin. As much as he tried to convince her otherwise, she still felt bad about the entire ordeal. Given the looks on some of the others' faces as he continued whistling, so did they. Or rather, maybe they just couldn't understand what he could be so happy about. For Justin, he just couldn't see what there was to get all down in the dumps about. At least one eye still worked, right?

The interrogator took another look at Justin's eye from across the table. Looking at it closer, he noticed that the pupil was completely missing from his left eye. There was just a blue iris, and nothing else. He hadn't understood why his hair was swept across it like that earlier, but now that he had heard the story, it started to make sense. I mean, if you were blind in one eye, you wouldn't want people staring at it either.

"Did it get better?"

"No."

"I would have sued the doctors if I were you."

"I considered it, but I think in the long run it was better that they were wrong. I mean, if I had come out that day and said to everyone I'd be blind forever? Well, I don't think things would have gone over too well."

"Do they know?"

"Know what? That I'm blind in one eye? Sorta. Chie found out a long time ago, and I'm sure the others suspect it, but that's about it."

The middle aged man reached out and grabbed a glass from the middle of the table. Midway through the story another officer had brought in beverages for the two: water for the detective, soda for the kid. Justin had taken offense at first that they assumed he should get a soda just because of his age, but he just let it go. It wasn't worth getting in an argument over.

"So let me try to put this in perspective. You and your friends... can jump into TV's? And that's because you have... what was it you said... personas?"

"If you weren't willing to hear the truth, then you shouldn't have asked for what I know."

"I believe you. I can tell just from the look in your eyes... well eye--"

"Don't joke about the eye."

"I didn't mean it that way. As I was saying, from the look in your eye, I can tell you weren't just making up bullshit. Either this has got to be the most premeditated fiction I have ever heard, or you're telling the truth. I'm going to assume the latter. I'm just having trouble wrapping my head around this."

"Most people do."

"Now I've noticed a common theme throughout your story so far. Almost from day one you had been interacting with your... what was it, 'shadow'? I don't understand, why didn't it confront you the way the others' did."

Justin paused for a brief moment, tapping at the tip of his cigarette to let the ashes fall in a nearby ash tray, taking a sip of the drinks that had been brought in for the two of them.

"To this very day, that question still eludes me. Maybe I'm just special."

He smirked at the thought. There was nothing about him that was special. Sure he had persona, and all that crap, but so did all his friends, and then some. It's like saying you're in the 27 club.

"Well maybe I can help you figure that out, though I'll need to know more. Continue with your story."

Justin chuckled a bit, much to the confusion of the interrogator.

"Something funny?"

"I'm surprised you haven't told me to cut the crap out about me and my social life."

"Well, I did ask for everything, didn't I?"

Justin chuckled once more before taking another drag at his cigarette.

“Smart man.”